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Gender and sexuality II: Activism

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Abstract
This report considers genders and sexualities within and across spaces of activism. Geographers concerned with social belonging, equity, human rights, civic duties, and gendered and sexed identities often engage in activism through participatory research and/or direct action. This report brings together geographical scholarship on feminist and queer (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer) – LGBTIQ – activism to examine the construction of transformative geographical knowledges. Feminist and queer activist geographers can be powerful forces for positive social change and challenge heteronormativity. They may also, however, reinforce normalizations and hierarchies within and beyond activist spaces. I bring together references that position geographers at the centre of activism, genders, sexualities and place.

Keywords
activism, politics, inequalities, protest, transformative geographies, feminism, genders, sexualities

I Introduction

At a time when many western nations are revising their legislative frameworks to recognize marriage equality for people of all genders, some geographers are arguing for more debate – and more action – about institutionalized partnership, love, families, sexual citizenship and belonging (Gabb and Fink, 2015; Morrison et al., 2013; Waitt, 2015; Wilkinson, 2014). Waitt (2015: 429) notes: 'while marriage powerfully links sex, intimacy, sexuality, citizenship and the nation, debates around marriage equality in Australia are often foreclosed by both advocates and opponents'.

This report, my second on gender and sexuality (Johnston, 2015), is not merely about marriage; rather, it is about the ways in which feminist and queer geographers – as researchers of activism and as activists – find themselves treading a line between 'respectability' and radical disruptive change in navigating the 'equalities landscapes' (Podmore, 2013: 265). The debate about marriage is, however, a useful starting point as it potentially opens up closer examinations of bodies, love, sexual intimacy, gender, families, belonging and sexual citizenship. Over the last five years or so a great deal of LBGTIQ activism has been dominated by marriage equality, causing some activist groups to split into those who fight for the right to say 'I do' and those who 'don't'. Like all binaries and relationships, it is never this simple (Browne, 2011).

Politically oriented scholarly activity has a significant history in geography, so it is timely

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to reflect on what counts as feminist and queer activism. We have well established literature on sexuality and citizenship focusing on many commercial gay scenes and the way in which they are produced. As a consequence, some feminist and queer geographers have berated others for not radically transforming – or queering – spaces, places, and the discipline of geography enough (Bell and Binnie, 2002; Oswin, 2004, 2008).

In reviewing LGBTIQ activist feminist and queer geography literature, I consider the following questions: are we still committed to radical change and transformation or have we become comfortable – even complacent – as laws change and university contexts alter (Hines, 2007; McDermott, 2011; Richardson, 2004; Richardson and Monro, 2012; Spade, 2011)? And, are feminist and queer activist geographers able to shed critical insights on taken-for-granted gender and sexual norms, thereby opening up debates about new possibilities and social realities (Weeks, 2007)? From this paradoxical position – between the normalities of equalities landscapes and radical change – I consider activism in the following sections: dissenting bodies, and pride and participation.

II Dissenting bodies

Many feminist and queer geographers are activists both within and outside of the academy. Being an activist and/or researching activism is driven by a desire to create equitable places and spaces, and where the personal is political (Cahill, 2007). The protest movements of the 1960s and '70s in western countries inspired many activists to be scholars with the idea that academic work is useful in challenging inequalities, insecurities, and processes of marginalization (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). Yet, academic work is also a site where some gendered and sexed bodies – and associated knowledges – are othered, marginalized and excluded. Indeed, activist geographers have 'come out' in order to challenge geography's heteronormativity. Dominant discourses that construct 'legitimate' knowers as rational, masculine and heterosexual silence those knowers who may not be, for example, heterosexual (see Binnie, 1997). Johnson (1994: 110) agonizes 'about the consequences – professional and otherwise – of 'coming-out' in print, declaring my own sexuality and building a feminist geography upon my lesbianism. But basically I have seen the risks as too great, the stakes too high in a homophobic culture and discipline.' Knopp, however, has for many years been involved in local politics and queer communities. Merging personal with professional, Knopp has conducted annual LGBT tours as part of a Geography Awareness Week event and he has long been accepted as an activist in the academy (Knopp, 2015).

Is it still risky for some to 'come out' in print/online? In other words, do we still need to use our bodies to challenge a narrow understanding of who counts as 'legitimate' knowers in geography? Johnson again (2012) reflects on her changing role in a recent article reviewing 30 years of Australian feminist geography. Her disengagement from feminist theories and activism is a result of: an equality agenda based on masculine values and standards as the norms; the sense that the feminist revolution is no longer needed because the objectives have been realized; an aging cohort of feminists who are no longer active mentors or knowledge producers; and the absence of a political movement that demands changes in the academy (Johnson, 2012).

This confession alerts us to specific, and accelerated, social and political changes within the academy and beyond. In an era of social reform it is useful to identify if a culture of gender equity and queer tolerance provides opportunities for feminist and queer geographers. Johnson (2012) suggests that social changes have complex and contradictory consequences, often aligning us with new gendered and sexed norms that are not necessarily

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transformative. Similarly, Longhurst and Johnston (2014), in our review of research on embodiment in 21 years of the *Gender, Place and Culture* journal, note feminist and queer geographers 'have been part of a process of writing bodies and their complex assemblages into a variety of geographical discourses but this strategy has not necessarily prompted a questioning or destabilisation of masculinism in the discipline' (Longhurst and Johnston, 2014: 274).

It is important to remember, however, that since the 1990s there have been a series of discrete but connected projects and articles on dismantling hegemonic human geography knowledges, as well as the 'activist-academic divide' (Ward, 2007: 698). Rather than sitting in ivory towers, geographers have turned out in to the streets, logged in online, and have broadened the scope of activism so that it goes beyond 'dramatic, physical, ''macho'' forms of activism with short-term public impacts' (Maxey, 1999: 200). Inspired by debates such as positionality and reflexivity, feminist and queer geographers engage in 'action research' to create mutually constitutive personal and professional geographies. The boundaries between activism and research, methods and theory are blurred, particularly when 'we are in a sense all activists, as we are all engaged in producing the world' (Maxey, 1999: 201). A public activist-scholar – seeking to transform the discipline of human geography, as well as research and personal communities – 'is about radical education and the public debate of ideas which challenge the norm' (Chatterton, 2008: 421).

Other feminist and queer geographers put their bodies and reputations 'on the line' in order to challenge the hegemony of human geography methodologies. Reflecting on their PhD fieldwork, both Billo and Hiemstra (2013: 313) examine how 'the researcher's personal and field life bleed into each other to shape the conduct of research'. Many feminist geographers are reluctant to discuss personal challenges for fear of 'seeming weak, of detracting attention from results, of not passing the ''test'' of fieldwork, being too focused on family, or concerns about appearing ''serious''' (Billo and Hiemstra, 2013: 313; see also Datta, 2008; Frohlick, 2002; Nairn, 2003; Sundberg, 2003). Queer-feminist activist research with LGBTIQ groups prompts some geographers to ask 'How do I study a group to which I belong politically and with which I identify? Am I queer enough?' (Misgav, 2016: 720). This method of research often brings us together with our communities, yet may also set us apart (Heckert, 2010; Nash, 2010).

Collaborative feminist research projects are another form of activism when they are designed to consider 'who-gets-what' (Benson and Nagar, 2006: 589) both offline and online (Elwood, 2008; de Jong, 2015a; McLean et al., 2016). Blending theory and practice (praxis), activist geographers connect with 'resisting others' – which may take the form of communities, groups, social movements, or nongovernment organizations who challenge various normative practices of dominating power – through critical collaboration.

Dissenting activist bodies and the power of emotions are capturing geographers' attentions (Brown and Pickerill, 2009a, 2009b), but not a great deal has been written about the emotional spaces of gender and queer activism, either within or outside of the academy. The political value in bringing together geographies of gender, sexualities, emotion, and activism is to 'unsettle the hierarchy of emotions that suggests that only certain feelings are productive for activism, while other emotions have less relevance in activist theory and practice' (Wilkinson, 2009: 42). Emotions are embodied, collective and political, hence integral to the construction of sociospatial relations that lead to queering human geography and community activism. Emotions are 'bound up with the securing of social hierarchy' (Ahmed, 2004: 4) and they are also enmeshed in destabilizing social hierarchies.

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Some scholars elaborate on the affectual and emotional politics of pride and shame in response to HIV/AIDS activism (Gould, 2009; Rand, 2012). Acknowledging the 25th anniversary of the founding of ACT UP, Rand (2012: 75) writes about the group's 'complicated affective intensities – affects that produce individual feelings, but also those that drive cultural histories and are directed toward political ends'. She charts an affective history, following Cvetkovich's (2003: 167) call for 'an archive of emotions' to capture activism's felt and traumatic dimensions of both pride and shame. Individual and collective experiences of pride and shame are important to consider as these visceral responses help (im)mobilize gay pride activism (Johnston, 2007).

In a special issue on 'Activism and Emotion' in the journal *Emotion, Space and Society*, Wilkinson (2009) questions the assertion that only some emotions are relevant to politics. In doing so she challenges any hierarchy of emotions and attempts to separate intimate queer lives from the public sphere of activism. Within a UK context, Wilkinson (2009) notes that autonomous politics are a reaction to the failings of the Left and about creating spaces of difference, yet often these groups fail to recognize gender and sexual difference, which may lead to a great deal of angst. One of Wilkinson's (2009: 38) queer activist interviewees commented: 'Just because some straight anarcho bloke is wearing a pink fluoro dress on a protest, or at a party, doesn't mean he's not acting like a macho wanker'. In the attempt to create supportive activist spaces hierarchies may emerge, particularly when there is no place for conflict or dispute within the group. In these situations it is not so much feeling out of place but that certain 'feelings' are out of place.

These dissenting bodies – scholar activists who challenge hegemonic knowledges, places and spaces – bring into focus the porous boundaries between academic, personal and public lives. Following dissenting bodies through geographical activist literature highlights the many ways feminist and queer geographers adapt and respond to inequalities and normative constructions of genders and sexualities.

III Pride and participation

There is now an established scholarship on pride activism, and much of this is a result of research on LGBTIQ politics in the city and community participation (Johnston and Waitt, 2015). As regularly claimed, in June 1969 several days of rioting signaled the beginning of a radical gay liberation movement (Weeks, 2015). The Stonewall Inn, Christopher Street in New York City, was the site where 'queens, queers and trans people fought back against the police' (Weeks, 2015: 45). The riots became an uprising, and in recognition of these Stonewall riots, gay pride groups organize annual festivals and parades to advocate for, and celebrate, gender and sexual diversity. Today, Christopher Street may be lined with many rainbow flags indicating LGBTIQ space. Yet not all rainbow communities feel included in this space which is dominated by 'White middle-class and not necessarily tolerant of LGBTQ YOC [youth of color]' (Irazábal and Huerta, 2016: 720). This is a rainbow world that only some have won (McDermott, 2011).

Contemporary urban expressions of gay pride now hinge on whether pride parades are effective forms of activism, or simply bright, sparkly and branded forms of commercialized homonormativity (Bell and Binnie, 2002; Duggan, 2002). Indeed, much scholarship on gay pride festivals in large cities focuses on: the commercialization of sexualized spaces and bodies for city branding (Bell and Binnie, 2004); the creation of a type of cosmopolitan climate (Rushbrook, 2002); and tourism (Johnston, 2005). Yet, these parades and festivals are both playful and political (Browne, 2007). A politics of pleasure is at the centre of events that are also about resisting and subverting

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discrimination, marginalization, intolerance and prejudice. Playful deconstructive spatial tactics may mobilize new forms of LGBTIQ activism, and at the same time tensions are created between partying, politics, and commercialization (Browne, 2007). For example, when regional authorities promote gay pride tourism, this is often deemed an indicator of LGBTIQ human rights progress. Yet, this may also establish some places as being considered more 'advanced or civilised' than others (Chambers, 2008).

Geographers have conducted extensive research around the globe on the diversity of gay pride in, for example: Australasia (de Jong, 2015b; Johnston and Waitt, 2015; Markwell and Waitt, 2009); Canada (Podmore, 2015); Europe (Binnie and Klesse, 2011; Blidon, 2009; Browne and Bakshi, 2013a; Johnston, 2005); and the Middle East (Hartal, 2016). These studies address regional activist politics of gay pride events, noting, for example, challenges to heteronormative city spaces and corporatized homonormative expression of capitalisms (Brown, 2007a). These '(flawed and imperfect) possibilities of the celebratory politics of pride' re-create LGBTIQ bodies as cosmopolitan urbanites (Browne and Bakshi, 2013a: 160).

The interplay of tourism, leisure and politics is highlighted by many mentioned above. So too are they highlighted by Binnie and Klesse (2011) when they examine the links between tourism and LGBTQ activism in the March for Tolerance (an annual tolerance and equality march) in Krakow, Poland. The politics of hospitality and solidarity (or solidarity tourism) significantly strengthens activist networks connected to the March for Tolerance event. This event is a good example of an enmeshed relationship between tourism and gay pride parades. Arising from this research is the recognition of feminists as core to LGBTQ activist networks (Binnie and Klesse, 2012, and see also Kulpa, 2014).

There is good evidence that while gay pride parades and festivals queer streets – and 'gayborhoods' (Brown, 2013; Ghaziani, 2014) – there is also active resistance from self-identified gay people. Waitt and Stapel (2011) interviewed people in Townsville (Queensland, Australia) who felt shame rather than pride when viewing the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade. The public display of gendered and sexed bodies 'fornicating on floats' is deemed unacceptable for some gay men in Townsville. This construction means that some dissenting bodies become synonymous with Sydney, and not with Townsville.

Flying the rainbow flag at pride events is increasingly seen as homogenizing, and counter to the recognition of the intersection of subjectivities based on more than gender and sexuality, but also class, ethnicity, indigeneity, disabilities, age and so on. Pride events, such as the Trans Day of Action for Social and Economic Justice in New York City, chose a more critical path and address the marginalization of 'queer and trans people of color, low income people, immigrants, and people with disabilities' (Spade, 2011: 206). When radically queer activists brush up against 'mainstream' reformist type organizations, such as Stonewall in the UK or the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in the US, gender and sexual normativities are challenged. Brown (2007a, 2007b) discusses the political practices of radically queer activists from different parts of the world who come together for Queeruption gatherings. Radically queer activism and the way in which it is aligned with anticapitalist and anarchist global justice movements challenge both homo and heteronomativites in a way that is both transformative and empowering (Brown, 2007b).

What constitutes gay pride activism, itself, is fought over, and interconnected with alternative economies of community socializing as well as mainstream highly commercial gay scenes (Andrucki and Elder, 2007). The diverse ways of doing activism means that lines are sometimes drawn between radical change and

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assimilation to norms. Conflicts tend to indicate different ideas about agendas and priorities of annual gay pride festivals.

Participating in, and being activists, beyond pride parades and in the day-to-day of queer communities, has absorbed some feminist and queer geographers (Browne and Bakshi, 2013a; Johnston and Longhurst, 2010; Misgav, 2015). Working with and in community groups brings to the fore everyday possibilities and tensions when feminist and queer groups align with institutions such as local and city authorities, and begin to operate within local authority spaces, such as funded LGBT centres (Hartal, 2015; Misgav, 2015) or within city authorities (Browne and Bakshi, 2013a).

Advancing the work of LGBT activisms, Browne and Bakshi (2013b) consider activists – themselves and others – who work for and within statutory services in Brighton and Hove, England's 'gay capital'. The 2010 Equalities Act has been a key mechanism to prompt a shift towards inclusionary politics at the level of local government, corporations and statutory services. Traditional forms of activism – that oppose the state – are no longer necessary, yet this leaves some questioning the incorporation of queer lives into normative institutions. Browne and Bakshi (2013b: 261) follow 'insider activists', charting the fraught experiences of activists who are 'challenged and critiqued and held to account'. This examination of the impact of equalities legislation is part of a larger participant-action research project, 'Count Me in Too' (Browne and Bakshi, 2013a). They call for a spatially sensitive 'politics of ordinariness' that does not necessarily imply assimilation or normativity.

Participatory research projects have proved fruitful for feminist and queer activist geographers, and much of this research is driven by personal commitments to researchers' own communities. These activist projects may be successful, but they also have limitations. Brown and Knopp (2008) discuss their counter-mapping activism in which they acknowledge both the democratic promises and antidemocratic realities of participatory mapping projects. Together with long-time elder Seattle residents and activists, they tried to produce a material artefact that boldly represented space, place, and spatial relations in Seattle, WA, but they also attempted to keep the map 'open, plural, equivocal, and tentative' (Brown and Knopp, 2008: 44). They encountered tensions and conflicts which they describe as just that – not simple or easy moments of harmony or reconciliation or commensuration. They decided to come clean about the limits of their participatory GIS project because the limits, compromises, and contradictions are integral to understanding queer geography and cartography/GIS.

Also concerned with mapping, Ferriera and Salvador (2015) disrupt heteronomativity in Portugal by creating and sharing collaborative web maps with lesbians. In the research project 'Creating Landscapes', participants' memories, emotions and feelings are used to create digital layers of lesbian visibility. There are opportunities for community and personal discoveries, as well as fostering positive changes and empowerment. These mapping participatory activist projects make lives liveable at a range of spatial scales. They may not be radically transformative or overthrow deep structural inequalities based on patriarchal homophobia and transphobia, yet they offer different ways to visualize places and bodies as multiple and diverse.

IV Conclusion

I began this report using a societal equality indicator – the right to marry – to open up debates about the usefulness of feminist and queer geographers' activism. My ongoing concern is that we may be too 'respectable' in our political actions, and hence avoid more radical disruptive change. There is plenty of evidence that state

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sanctioned coupledom provides a narrow view of familial relationships and sexual diversity (Wilkinson, 2014). Yet, marriage equality debates provide ample scope for geographers/activists to provide critical insights into taken-for-granted social norms and to ask, as Waitt (2015: 434) does: 'where are the spaces for single people, unmarried people, those living apart, sex-workers, and the polyamorous?'

Feminist and queer geographers argue that place matters to LGBTIQ politics and activism. There are many ways in which diverse genders and sexualities are spatially policed, marginalized, and valorized. The construction of geographical knowledge has, and continues to be, challenged by geographers who question taken-for-granted norms and seek new 'rainbow' possibilities. So too do geographers who actively participate in gay pride politics and parties. At the heart of pride activism research is that place matters to the construction, performance, and politics of gay pride.

This report highlights feminist and queer geographers' action, reaction, and research on activism, as it continuously moves across and between a politics of respectability and radical transformative change. Geographers committed to building inclusive spaces and places react to multiple and shifting hegemonies. Such scholar-activist agility is needed when responding to ongoing heterosexism/homophobia, genderism/transphobia, and sexism/misogyny.

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